



Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development

POLICY BRIEF

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Religious Communities and Corona in the Middle East

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Abstract:

Religious communities and organisations, religious institutions, religio-political mass movements and interfaith organisations are responding to the coronavirus pandemic in the Middle East. They have been fulfilling distinct roles and are suited for different aspects of international development cooperation and humanitarian aid. Local communities integrate material and spiritual support and reach people otherwise hard to reach. Islamic courts and ministries engage in health messaging. The role of mass-movements remains controversial and continued reconsideration of their place among social service providers is mandated by their size and impact. Interfaith organisations can foster social cohesion and tackle gender-related challenges to development. The varied responses of these actors should be seen against the backdrop of a widening gap between Arab governments and citizens since the Arab Spring in 2011. The corona pandemic challenges development cooperation to quickly translate international funding into local action. Development cooperation should draw on the distinct strengths of religious actors to counter economic and social hardships now and in the near and midterm future.



Collection box for support of underprivileged school-children in an Eastern Orthodox Church

Religious Communities and Corona in the Middle East

Introduction: Four Groups of Religious Actors and a Regional Trend

This policy brief discusses how the coronavirus pandemic affects religious communities, leaders and organisations in the Middle East, and what the implications are for those who work with them in development cooperation and humanitarian aid. To make the diverse landscape of Middle Eastern religious actors more accessible, they are viewed in four categories: (1) religious communities and organisations (local and international), (2) religious institutions (such as Islamic courts etc.), (3) religious-political mass movements (such as Hezbollah or Hamas) and (4) interfaith organisations.

For conciseness, the focus is on Muslim and Christian actors and the countries of Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt. However, the policy brief also provides a more comprehensive analysis by viewing the challenges of the pandemic against the backdrop of the growing space between governments and citizens in the region since the Arab Spring in 2011.

The Governments-Citizens Gap and the Coronavirus

The coronavirus pandemic hits the Arab Middle East at a time of increased detachment between state and citizens. The Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 evolved around the realisation of how severely Arab governments have been failing to meet their citizens' basic needs for sustenance, employment, governance, opportunities and justice (Jawad 2015; Henry and Springborg 2010). This led to very different realities in the countries of the region. From the wars in Syria and Yemen to the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power and subsequent ousting in Egypt to the recent uprisings in Lebanon and Iraq, religious actors have found themselves in unexpected and at times unprecedented contexts since 2011. A common characteristic of these contexts, however, is the ongoing question of how Arab governments manage or fail to care for their citizens. Viewed in all its regional and local complexity, and with the uncertainties that the corona pandemic adds, the range of possible answers appears broader than ever.

The gap between citizens' needs and governments' provisions has substantially widened in recent years. While religious communities have always been an integral part of civil society and frequently also politics in the Middle East, this growing gap means that the field of engagement for social welfare and development efforts by religious actors is now considerably larger and still growing. Thus, religious actors in the region are affected by the twofold challenge of a widening space between governments and citizens and the acute challenges caused by the pandemic. The forces of both circumstances will influence the region in the near and midterm future.

1) *Local and International Religious Communities and Organisations*

Preliminary findings from ongoing research by the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development (RCSD) show that members of local mosque or church communities look to their religious leaders for help during the coronavirus pandemic. In the early results from the online survey on Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona, local religious leaders state that they respond to the pandemic predominantly through four activities.

The most frequently mentioned is preaching on corona related topics. This often includes admonitions to adhere to government-imposed health measures. Religious communities around the world made headlines spreading the virus through gatherings, singing, the Eucharist and other practices. Such cases also emerged on social media in Syria and Lebanon, and in some cases leaders appear to have made matters worse by implying the faithful would be protected from infection due to the holiness of the religious act. Against this backdrop, RCSD's research suggests, however, that leaders used their preaching mandate much more frequently to enhance than to defy infection prevention measures.

Closely behind preaching, most frequently mentioned activities related to the pandemic are food and financial assistance. The coronavirus pandemic coincided with major festive seasons of Ramadan and Easter, which entail special donations by community members for charitable and welfare purposes. In Iraq and Lebanon, the pandemic however also coincided with severe economic and political crises, the cumulative force of which led to dramatic economic and social hardship. Local religious communities have been quick to respond to these circumstances, frequently reaching marginalised people not served by larger organisations or public service providers.

A fourth corona-related activity frequently named by religious leaders is thematic prayer. Thus, the four most prevalent responses are equally split between spiritual and material support, confirming findings from RCSD's previous research in Sub-Saharan Africa which showed that religious communities respond to challenges in a manner that balances both material and spiritual support (the latter including mental health/psycho-social support).

As local communities and organisations respond to crises such as the coronavirus, their efforts are marked by immediacy and swiftness that comes with the deep roots they have in their communities. Local religious actors have in the past often been avoided by international development actors who favoured secular local partners. But what Clark (Clark 2004, 151) says about Islamic welfare organisations in Jordan, Egypt and Yemen likely counts for most religious organisations and communities engaging in relief and development work in the region.

The significance of [these organisations] lies not in the actual services they provide—many NGOs do the same—or in some form of Islamic “framework” within which they provide the services, for by and large there is none. Rather it lies in the intangible accumulation of social capital—trust, solidarity.

This social capital forms among their constituents as well as the people they serve. These communities and organisations thus receive the trust citizens have been losing in their governments, especially since the Arab Spring.

International religious organisations specialised in development and humanitarian aid (e.g. Islamic Relief or Caritas) have been responding swiftly and effectively to the hardships caused by the pandemic in the region. Unlike most local organisations and communities, they can draw on potent international partnerships. As western governments started to mobilise emergency funds in response to corona, international religious organisations found themselves in a mediating position to funnel international support to their local partners or own local offices. In doing so they fulfilled an essential function. Christina Bennett, CEO of Start Network, a group of 40 secular and religious aid agencies, recently commented on the fundamental importance of translating international funding into local action quickly:

Public and private donors have pledged billions in international aid so far, but the bulk of those billions are being spent through the World Health Organisation, the United Nations system, and the development banks, which are not set up to act with the speed and flexibility coronavirus response requires. ... Local NGOs in the affected countries – which offer agility, reach, depth of experience, and frontline access, are left wanting, waiting for these funds to trickle down to them. ... Ebola also taught us that local responses rooted in and implemented by communities were the fastest, most trusted, and most effective means to stem the progression of the disease. Then, local organisations were able to take and enforce community actions, where international aid organisations and governments could not. Now, this will be particularly important to stopping the spread of coronavirus, which will require trusted voices to re-enforce public health messages and practices that run counter to normal patterns of behaviour. (Bennett 2020)

In many Middle Eastern contexts, religious communities are exactly those grassroots actors embedded in the local context for which Bennett identifies a crucial role in responding to the current crisis. International religious organisations have an important function as conduits for international emergency funding to reach local contexts. As the crisis continues, localisation of aid stays a priority and the role of international religious organisations and their relationship to local partners should be researched further.

2) Religious Institutions

Another relevant category of religious actors consists of institutions that reach beyond the local communities (Wehrey et al. 2020). Islamic courts (Dar Al-Iftaa) are led by a Mufti and give theological and legal rulings. One special contribution of Islamic jurisprudence during the pandemic has been the changing of the parameters for the annual charitable donation *Zakah*. The Islamic court in Jordan declared it legal to donate from recent income (instead of savings only) and to donate ahead of Ramadan (instead of during Ramadan only). Both measures increased the potential for more donations to respond to the needs caused by the pandemic. The ruling stated:

In light of the corona virus pandemic, where a substantial proportion of the community is sitting idle and has no money to cover the basic needs of survival, we are of the view that the wealthy should hasten to pay the Zakah of their wealth before its due time and not to delay it till Ramadan. (‘Iftaa’ Department 2020)

Government ministries of religious endowments (Wasara Al-Awqaf) are another common supra-local religious structure in Arab Middle Eastern countries. Mosques fall under their jurisdiction, taking the legal form of endowments, but also some markets, hospitals and other public institutions. Besides managing the public health aspects of Friday prayer, these ministries communicate religious messages to the public. For example, the Jordanian minister of Al Awqaf, Dr. Muhammad Al-Khalayleh, called on Jordanians to comply to the government’s measures in order to win the fight against the coronavirus, referencing the compliance of prophet Muhammad’s warriors in battle.¹ In a more curious case the Egyptian ministry called out an individual for defying the ban on communal prayer.²

¹ وزير الأوقاف: يجب أن نتغلب على شهواتنا ونلتزم بالتعليمات لنتنصر على كورونا | رؤيا الإخباري 2020

² ‘Video: Egypt’s Religious Endowments Ministry Identifies Running “sheikh” 2020

Christian bodies include diocesan or ecumenical organisations. Like others, they have commented on public health issues, but also reflected on the pandemic in light of their thematic focus fields. For example, Dr. Souraya Bechealany of the Middle East Council of Churches said:

[The] COVID-19 outbreak made us want to return to ourselves, to contemplate our relationship with God, with the universe, with individuals and communities. This return, though late, occurs in a deeply complicated health, economic and social situation associated with severe impacts on the present and future of mankind. Therefore, there is a need for an unconventional conscience awakening along with a moral approach to public policy for consolidation of peace, social justice and sustainable development. (MECC 2020)

These bodies are easily overlooked as possible partners for development cooperation, but their messaging and policy mandates should be further examined for potential synergies with international development efforts.

3) *Religio-Political Mass Movements*

Religio-political mass movements like Hezbollah, Al Amal, Hamas or the Muslim Brotherhood are at the same time religious, social, political and military groups. However, they also run extensive networks of social services, including medical facilities.³ Their response to the corona pandemic is not uncontroversial: Their social services are intertwined with political agendas and operate in close proximity to their military structures. While their circumstances are different in different countries (the Muslim Brotherhood is outlawed in Egypt, Hamas is de-facto ruler in Gaza, Hezbollah is represented in government in Lebanon), a common factor between them is that they use social welfare to increase their influence on society and politics. This is particularly visible in the current pandemic. The mass movements respond to the crisis by employing their sizeable medical care systems to claim a prominent role in public health achievements for their constituencies and wider society. Hezbollah, for example, after first being accused of introducing the virus to Lebanon through Iran, recently made headlines for the large scale of its health service response, presenting itself as medical benefactor for wider Lebanese society.⁴ The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, whose vast health system has been dismantled by the Sisi government, started to use similar rhetoric emphasising their helping role in the crisis for the common good.⁵ Unconfirmed reports that Hamas *secretly* sent doctors to Israel for corona-related training shed further light on these movements' role in the pandemic: commitment to genuine help goes hand in hand with a desire for self-promotion.⁶ Despite their ambiguous political role, they are highly influential actors that have the power to foster and hinder processes of development.

³ The group said it would deploy 25,000 people in response to the pandemic, including 4,500 medical staff (*Reuters* 2020). It operates five hospitals and many smaller clinics ('Why Does Hezbollah Want Lebanon's Health Ministry?' 2020; 'The Many Hands and Faces of Hezbollah' 2006).

⁴ 'Hezbollah Launches Its Newest War, This Time against Coronavirus' 2020

⁵ 'Egypt: Muslim Brotherhood Launches Campaign to Combat COVID-19' 2020

⁶ 'Hamas Coordinates Coronavirus Trainings for Gaza Doctors, Nurses in Israel: Reports' 2020

4) *Interfaith Organisations*

Interfaith organisations are finding distinct roles in the coronavirus pandemic in the Middle East. Interfaith organisations, e.g. Iraqi Al Amal Association (Iraq), Adyan (Lebanon), Forum for Dialogue Culture and Development (FDCD, Lebanon and Syria), or the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies (RIIFS, Jordan), have been actively responding to the pandemic by working on its considerable impact on social cohesion, human rights and citizenship (Petersen, Thomas, and Hassan 2020). Besides this thematic focus, interfaith organisations have two distinct advantages as actors in the corona pandemic.

First, interfaith organisations often have a strong academic profile. This means they can add local perspectives to the global effort of researching religious communities' role in the pandemic. For example, RIIFS is currently conducting a study on corona implications on Freedom of Religion and Belief, as well as a volume of its Arabic periodical Mukabatat (Debates) dedicated to the coronavirus. Written from a multi-faith vantage point, these contributions can count as less biased compared to those of other religious actors. Second, interfaith organisations are more likely to have women in leadership positions (cf. e.g. recent leadership of Adyan and RIIFS). In a region where religious discourse is almost exclusively male, this is a considerable advantage. The pandemic has caused rising cases of gender-based violence and increased the vulnerability of the many female-led households in war-torn Syria. Interfaith organisations can combine faith- and gender-sensitivity in their approaches to these growing challenges.

Conclusion and Implications

For Middle Eastern religious communities and organisations, the coronavirus has substantially increased the local challenges to be met. This is particularly true where the pandemic hit societies already in acute upheaval (Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon). But it is also true on a regional level, where the coronavirus frequently hit religious communities and organisations already stretched by serving societies in a growing rift between citizens and governments.

International development cooperation should be mindful of the distinct roles different religious actors play in the twofold field of tension of corona on the one hand and the social and political shifts of the region on the other hand, ten years after the beginning of the Arab Spring. Religious actors in the region have been playing a vital role in confronting the coronavirus-related increase of poverty, food insecurity, stress on healthcare and education systems, and they can also contribute to the pandemic's impact on gender equality, social cohesion, peace and development. Going forward into the near future undoubtedly marked by the continuing effects of the pandemic, five conclusions emerge.

1. Local religious communities and organisations offer distinct value for development cooperation during corona.

During the corona pandemic, the importance and potential of working with local religious communities and organisations becomes particularly visible. In addition to local experience, these actors are characterised by the high degree of social capital they have with both international development organisations and the local population, making them potent partners for development cooperation.

An important step forward will be to build up local capacity and connect these actors to international funding to unlock their potential to mitigate the corona crisis in the region.

2. Continued analysis and debate concerning the role of **religio-political mass movements**.

Cooperation with popular mass movements during the corona pandemic theoretically is an option, given their medical and social service capabilities. However, such cooperation comes with political and security concerns due to the proximity between social service and military wings. Nonetheless, it will be important to continuously stay aware of these movements' evolving role in the crisis in the region. An open and unbiased discussion on the possibility of cooperation is recommended. Discourse on this topic should include practitioners and policy makers and engage evidence from the fields of development studies, political sciences, religious sciences, interfaith studies and security studies. Leading questions should be:

- How do these movements contribute to development and humanitarian aid during the corona pandemic?
- What are the ramifications for their standing in society, their role within their states, and the wider region?
- Can development cooperation engage with these actors in light of their ambiguous role?

3. **Interfaith organisations** play a unique role and deserve attention.

International development actors should continuously explore the potential for cooperation with interfaith partners. They are uniquely qualified to tackle corona-related challenges in the area of social cohesion and issues related to gender. Because they inherently represent diversity, interfaith organisations often connect more easily with western governments or multilateral organisations than single-faith actors, while at the same time maintaining close links with religious constituencies of the participating communities. They could in the mid-term provide starting points for western governments and development organisations to establish effective and trusting relationships with Muslim actors for development cooperation in the region.

4. **International religious organisations** provide connection points to local ones and serve as intermediaries.

International religious organisations are trusted partners, often with long standing experience in the region and the capacity to comply with administrative standards. An additional value, however, lies in the benefit that these organisations can frequently provide bridges to local partners and communities. Therefore, international development cooperation should further pursue collaboration with organisations like Islamic Relief, Caritas, Brot für die Welt, World Vision and others that work in partnerships with local religious actors. Further research should focus on how international organisations can serve as intermediaries to local actors predominantly by creating trust and accountability, raising efficiency and keeping administrative demands on local partners manageable and growing local capacity and enabling timely access to international funding. These will be key factors to harnessing local communities' capabilities for swift and effective aid in fast-evolving crises such as the coronavirus pandemic.

5. **Research** is needed to analyse the growing field of engagement of religious actors in the Middle East.

It will be important to continuously analyse the growing gap between Middle Eastern citizens and governments, since it is the backdrop against which the pandemic is evolving. What will be these actors' particular contributions for development cooperation and humanitarian aid in the region in the near and midterm future? How big is their actual contribution compared to state efforts? How can their potential be assessed to upscale their activity?

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